

## ***The Tree of Love: Life writing and ‘seasons of self’ by former child soldiers in Colombia***

Mathew Charles, Research Fellow in the Faculty of International, Political and Urban Studies at El Rosario University, Bogotá.

[matcharles@me.com](mailto:matcharles@me.com)

Karen Fowler-Watt, Senior Principal Academic in the Faculty of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University, UK.

(Corresponding author: [kfowler-watt@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:kfowler-watt@bournemouth.ac.uk))

### **ABSTRACT:**

*Autobiographies of childhood generally focus on narratives of nostalgia or trauma, depicting notions of lost innocence. This article posits that such a Global North perspective needs to be re-imagined when listening to the ‘self-stories’ of child soldiers from Colombia’s indigenous Nasa community in the Cauca region. They described their experiences of conflict in a series of narrative workshops located around the Tree of Love, (el árbol del amor) - a place where hopes and dreams are shared, its strength and constancy representing the resilience of the Nasa people in the face of violence. These shared narratives are presented as 4 chapters, each depicting a season, characterised by a different form of epiphany, constituting “liminal experiences connected to moments of ... crisis” (Denzin, 2017: 52). The article is presented in narrative style, enabling the researchers to stay close to the young child soldiers’ lives. Together these narrative extracts offer a mosaic of auto/biographical experiences that portray the journey from war child to child soldier to child survivor. The ability to resist re-recruitment in spaces that remain dangerous, where the cycle of violence is relentless, appears to be bolstered by an agency that comes from within, offering potential for post-traumatic growth.*

**Keywords:** Colombia; child soldier; epiphany; trauma; self-story.

*Death is a state  
Where everything goes dark  
Where light doesn’t shine  
On the pathways we take*

*Death is another way  
Of not feeling what we want to touch are shared*

*It’s an emptiness where  
Nobody wants to arrive*

*Death gives you an end  
Without knowing where you’ll stop*

*We cannot wait for it  
Because it arrives when we least expect it.*

- Anonymous former child soldier, 17 years old.

## **Introduction**

The idea that childhood autobiographies constitute narratives of nostalgia or trauma forms a predominant view amongst academic and recreational readers (Douglas, 2010). Whilst perhaps not surprising, this Global North perspective infers the existence of an idyllic and even mythological childhood that in some way has been lost or stolen, and projects a universal notion of what it means to be a child. Indeed, the most common definitions of children and childhood are based on assumptions of vulnerability (Douglas, 2010). Within the context of conflict, this can lead to narratives of victimisation, in which children are perceived as nothing more than passive targets of violence (Berents, 2019: 460).

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the contested politics of trauma, but it is important to note that trauma is viewed by many scholars as a projection of Western hegemony. Rather than 'forging relationships of empathy and solidarity with non-Western others', the application of trauma from narrowly defined Global North perspectives has in fact privileged 'the suffering of white Europeans' (Andermahr, 2015: 1). The centrality of 'flash points' as moments of social crises (Douglas, 2010:14), 'continues to adhere to the traditional event-based model of trauma, according to which trauma results from a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event' (Andermahr, 2015: 2). Such assumptions fail to take sufficient account of the experiences of those living in conflict-laden circumstances, whose traumatic experiences are not derived from singular episodes, but on the contrary are continuous and all-encompassing. To suggest that childhoods of war are somehow exceptional (meaning unusual or not typical) is therefore to victimise the millions of children in the Global South for whom conflict, and violence are daily realities. Likewise, to label the experiences of children and young people living on the margins as simply traumatic ignores the diversity of their lived experiences. In contrast to notions of traumatised victims, war and violence can often precipitate a survival mode or 'positive outcomes' (McMahon, 2005), which result in 'a higher functioning in the perception of the self, others and attitudes to life' (Massé, 2011: 164).

Thus, children and young people are discerned as active participants in cultural and socio-political contexts where they develop the tools and skills to navigate the risks of their dangerous worlds, such as Colombia's 'spaces of death' (Taussig, 1984) described in the 17-year-old former child soldier's recollections that open this article. 'Child owned' and 'child authored' narratives of war offer a 'productive way of thinking about children's agency' and break 'the systematic and comprehensive silencing of children's voices' (Berents, 2020: 461).

Child soldiers are simultaneously perceived as both perpetrators (those who join armed groups voluntarily) and victims (those who are forced to join against their will), but these binaries of victim/perpetrator and forced/voluntary do little to enlighten us about the reality of child participation in conflict. Most cases of recruitment take place in the "grey zone" between choice and coercion, which, within a challenging socio-political context, limits and shapes agency, meaning their capacity to act. That is to say that children and young people make decisions based on the information available at the time of recruitment, rather than simply being abducted (Bjorkhaug, 2010). Indeed, for Moynagh (2011), child soldier autobiographies provide a 'textual battleground' in which the dominant victim/perpetrator binary is de-constructed.

A child soldier is defined by the 1997 Cape Town Principles as:

'any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members'<sup>1</sup>

Child soldiers are commonly 'posed as social and military aberrations that must be corrected by humanitarian assistance, rather than as products and indicators of social inequalities that require structural changes' (Martuscelli and Duarte Villa, 2018: 390-391). From this perspective, children's own decisions to participate in conflict 'tend not be recognised' (ibid., 391). For Berents (2020), memoirs of child soldiers offer a 'window into the minds of

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<sup>1</sup> The Cape Town Principles can be accessed here: <http://openasia.org/en/g/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Cape-Town-Principles.pdf>

children and their diverse experiences of war', but they are also a mirror to society, one which can make for uncomfortable viewing (Ibid,18).

### **Colombia's child soldiers:**

Some 17,000 children are estimated to have participated in the Colombian conflict as combatants (López-Rojas et al., 2017: 17), and according to one study, 81% of these say they joined an armed group 'voluntarily' (Springer, 2012: 44). The UN Security Council Resolution 2250 from 2015 recognises the importance of youth (18-29 years old) in 'peacekeeping, peace promotion and international security, including the prevention of future conflicts' (UNSC, 2015). In Colombia specifically, the role of children as peace-builders is recognised by the country's peace accords, signed by the government and the leftist insurgents, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (the FARC) in 2016.

In the absence of formal methods of participation, however, it is informal projects like ours, which create opportunities for children and young people to participate, guaranteeing them a voice and creating spaces in which their voices can be heard. The project on which this article is based was funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund in the United Kingdom and set out to create a space in which 25 children and young people from the indigenous community in the town of Jambaló in Cauca could share their experiences of conflict. Participants between the ages of 9 and 22 from the region's Nasa community came together to construct their 'self-stories' (Denzin, 1989) of child soldiering and/or of living in conflict. The aim was to foster social inclusion and to contribute to Colombia's complex process of reconciliation within one of the communities that suffered and continues to suffer most from the country's protracted violence. Springer's (2012) quantitative analysis of the participation of children and teenagers in the Colombian conflict concludes that indigenous children are 674 times more likely to be a victim of conflict than other children (22).

### **Epiphanies and analysis of experience**

For Whitlock (2010), autobiographies function as 'soft weapons', which can 'personalise and humanise categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen

and unheard.’ Bruner (1986) sees narrative as ‘life-making’, and Douglas (2010) also suggests that the stories we tell about our childhoods present a means by which the historical self can be constructed. Compelling social history can emerge from biographical studies, as life stories can illuminate our understanding of socio-political and cultural contexts (Author, XXXX).

The notion of epiphanies forms a crucial focus for any examination of lived experience, since ‘epiphanies often leave marks on lives’ (Denzin, 1989:33). Denzin (2017) notes that ‘an epiphany can foster key turning points in life or provoke moments of intense reflection’ (Ibid: 71) and describes epiphanies as ‘liminal experiences connected to moments of ...crisis’ (Ibid: 52). He divides the concept of epiphany into four main types:

- (1) the “major epiphany”, which “touches every fabric of a person’s life”;
- (2) the “cumulative epiphany”, “which signifies emotions or reactions to experiences” over time;
- (3) the illuminative or “minor” epiphany, which represents a “problematic moment”;
- (4) the “re-lived epiphany”, where meaning is attained through “the reliving of the experience” (Denzin, 2001: 34-38).

This article offers a mosaic of autobiographical extracts, which explore the varied lives of child soldiers and constitutes a collection of unfinished stories depicting a series of violent childhoods, defined by different types of epiphany. It describes a journey from war child to child soldier and finally, (and hopefully), to child survivor. It charts a progression from simple resilience to attainment of the ability to resist re-recruitment in spaces that remain dangerous. This resistance appears to be bolstered by an agency that comes from within, which could offer potential for post traumatic growth (PGT). The former child soldiers do not present themselves as victims, nor as perpetrators, but as first-hand eyewitnesses of history. As researchers it is important that we stay close to the words that people speak, cognisant that ‘one becomes the stories that one tells’ (Denzin, 1989:81). Through the autobiographical lens, these multiple and subjective truths about living with conflict meld the personal and socio-political and combine perspectives on the past and present to build distinct hopes and desires for the future. This collage of incomplete, but coherent narratives, come together to shape the autobiography of the Colombian child soldier. A studied life is ‘the study of a life in time’ (Erben,1998:13) where location and context are

acknowledged, and the researcher is aware of the role of memory. The research participants remember what they remember at the time and within their social location, as Bruner (1986) reminds us:

‘eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very "events" of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives’ (Ibid: 694).

This understanding that narrative offers a way of making sense of our lives, inspired us to write this article in narrative style, since it offered an approach that enabled us to stay as close to the lived experiences of the young people as possible. It is written in their words, to offer ‘narratives of personal experience’ (Mishler, 1999:79).

### **The *Tree of Love* and ‘seasons of self’**

Jambaló lies deep in the Andes of Cauca, surrounded by the emerald green of some of Colombia’s highest peaks. It is a place where each day begins and ends the same way. Sunrise is masked by a thin veil of mist. The frosty air dissolves as the piercing sun rises, the fog lifting to make way for the intense heat that comes from being so close to the sky. But with nightfall, comes the biting cold once more. The blackness of the dark interrupted only by the glitter of the brightest stars. Here, *La Madre Tierra* or Mother Earth, as she is affectionately known, watches over the indigenous Nasa people, who have called this place home forever. But despite her best efforts, this semi-autonomous reservation constitutes a zone of protracted conflict in which violence has become as predictably routine as her climate. Jambaló is a place where the young have disappeared, and their elders have been too scared to report it. But today, some of the disappeared are returning. Their lives in the rank and file of a war that never really belonged to them are over. Yet there is no joy here, just fear and uncertainty, even if disguised as relief.

Deep within the mountains of Jambaló, a tree stands tall and sturdy. *El árbol del amor*, the Tree of Love, provides a sanctuary for those who visit. This pink poui or tabebuia rosea known in Spanish as *el roble de sabana* or savannah oak has become an important symbol of resistance and reconciliation: it has withstood five decades of conflict, and is a

haven where hopes, dreams and secrets are shared. Although there are no seasons in this part of the world, this neotropical tree manifests a cycle of changes throughout the year. For locals, this is nothing to do with geography, but everything to do with temper. In times of peace and happiness, the tree will blossom, they say, but in times of pain, its distinct tiny pink flowers can be seen falling and fading into the wind, leaving its branches bare. It was under the boughs of the Tree of Love that we came together for our workshops with a group of former child soldiers. It was against the backdrop of the tree's cycle that we began to map young lives, the seasons providing the perfect opportunity to explore and find meaning within ourselves and our place in the world.

The seasons carry a sense of mysticism and beauty for the Nasa people, confined by the daily routine of their climate of extremes. The seasons convey a sense of hope and progression, instilling a belief that whatever comes our way is temporary. Challenges or misfortunes may be formed in our past and shaped by our present, but the future brings unequivocal change and an opportunity to readjust. The seasons therefore represent a cycle of optimism in which life constantly regenerates, symbolised by the tree and its source of vitality. These seasons of self emerge as four distinct stages or chapters within the life narrative of Colombia's child soldier. Each depicted here through vignettes of lived experience and accompanied by the children's illustrations of the tree:

Chapter 1: *Winter's warhood*; Chapter 2: *Spring's hope*; Chapter 3: *Summer's soldiering* and Chapter 4: *Autumn's reflection*.

### **Winter's warhood**

[insert Figure 1: The Tree of Love in Winter]

*I wish cars had wings so I  
could escape and make new friends in a better place.  
(11-year-old male).*

*Bodies, bodies everywhere.  
Death. Murder. War.  
This was my winter. This was my childhood.  
(14-year-old female).*

The darkness of winter brings narratives of death and despair. The Tree of Love is bare of leaf and flower. The skeleton of branches yearns for the beating of the heart of spring. In

winter, children of war long to escape to 'a better place' and ache for a world 'where daddy doesn't get drunk and hit mummy' (9-year-old) or where they can 'study and not have to work' (12-year-old). Winter reveals painful tales of abduction, coercion and conscription:

*Me, they abducted me from my home. I was 15. And from that moment I suffered rape. From the moment a girl arrives at a camp, from the moment a commander touches her, then anyone else can, and the rapes are constant. Apart from the rape, I ended up pregnant and so they forced me to abort a six months pregnancy. I was 16. I couldn't cry. I couldn't tell anyone. Every day was so painful, so difficult. But after the abortion, I was always crying, but only when I was on guard duty because that's the moment when you're practically alone. I asked God for forgiveness for not being able to protect the little creature and it was heavy on my conscience, but it shouldn't have been because I tried to look after him as much I could, but it was taken out of my hands. There was nothing I could have done. If I'd have tried to escape, they would have killed me. The pain of then is the pain of now. To be honest, I just don't understand. I know I have to be strong and so I am (22-year-old female).*

For Douglas (2010: 89), dialogism is inherent to autobiographical narratives of childhood, which constitute a dialogue between an adult and child self. This mainly occurs in three ways: (1) via the all-knowing, retrospective adult; (2) speaking for the child, within the juxtaposition of the adult and child voices; and (3) in the use of the naïve child voice. Although the author of the text above may have reached adulthood, this dialogism is distinctly absent. In fact, the text is devoid of distinction between child and adult. As a result, such raw texts bring the significance of the actual experience to the fore. The rape and sexual abuse endured by the young woman are not confined to history, but instead remain ever present and carry into the future.

Douglas (2010:110–11) concludes that because of the distance between traumatic childhood experiences and the moment of writing, 'autobiography has become a mechanism for mediating between the past and the present, between the child and the adult self, and between trauma and healing'. In the text above, and indeed in many of the vignettes presented in this article, such mediation is, however, better explained by a sense of contention, in which thoughts are constructed, challenged and changed over time. Such contentious texts remain incomplete or unfinished, not just in the sense that they tell only partial stories or depict particular events or episodes, but because the author is wrapped up in an ongoing search for meaning and significance. Rather than naivety, this represents a



rawness and immediacy, illustrating the complexity of child soldiering and reflecting the child's multifarious experiences of violence.

The young author has not yet attained the ability to exercise hindsight and is immersed in a journey towards understanding. This writing for healing is an exploration of the impact of trauma. The closeness of the traumatic experience makes the outcome of this journey uncertain. The distinction or progression between childhood and adulthood within contexts of conflict is therefore merged into a *warhood*, blurring not just the boundaries of age, but also of experience, of the temporal frontiers between the before, the now and the next. The young author remains distinctly anchored in the moment of writing, desperately yet optimistically seeking substance through their quest for respite, happiness and security. In this context of a search for both meaning and healing, the reader also embarks on a journey; both author and reader dig deep in a quest to understand.

In contrast to the horrific experiences recounted in this vignette, the vast majority of cases of recruitment are more complex than abduction. At the other end of the spectrum, for example, enlistment is often both a response to and consequence of violent circumstances, in that it is perceived to provide a sense of agency, control and escape. *Warhood* therefore also constitutes something much more physical than the blurring of boundaries of time and experience; it is characterised by protracted armed conflict and long-term consequential and structural phenomena such as poverty, domestic violence, unemployment and a lack of opportunity. In addition, *warhood* creates a context of distrust, weakening the role of family and friendship. Loved ones and parents, in particular, lose the ability to offer protection and safety because armed groups carry more power and authority than the families themselves, undermining social bonds and what it is to feel human.

In this situation, where there is little opportunity for escape 'to a better place', the best children can do is seek temporary respite. Through a navigation of their dangerous world, children of war embody a calm intelligence about their surroundings. War children pursue a sense of agency, desperately seeking to control their circumstances and liberate themselves not just from violence, but from the victimisation and suffering that defines their lives on the margins:

*Death is to stop fighting for our dreams.*

*It's to wake up and find no purpose in your life.*

*It's to leave the good moments behind and make them bitter.*

*It's to fall over and not get back up.  
It's to forget.  
It's to feel pain.  
(16-year-old female).*

Conflict is perhaps unsurprisingly perceived as destructive by those children who live among it. Often reprieve from violence is achieved only through the imagination. The destruction of war is therefore not perceived as simply physical, but also as psychological:

*War damaged each of our dreams that we as children wanted to build. Dreams were all we had. But even dreams can be taken away.*

*Dreams were an escape. From violence. From being poor. From being bored. A chance to think about what could be. A chance to play. To be safe.*

*Dreams were hope. A wish. A goal.*

*Dreams are life. We lived in dreams.  
But when dreams disappear, you become nothing.*

*It hurts more than bullets or bombs.  
(14-year-old male).*

Play and joyfulness are rarely experienced without the backdrop of violence. Fun becomes an object of fantasy, only ever lived expeditiously. Many of the vignettes recount playtime being interrupted by crossfire, for example. As one participant wrote, *'I spent more time under my desk hiding from bombs than I did learning from the blackboard or being able to play outside'* (13-year-old). The war child is therefore not carefree, but on the contrary generally anxious. Yet amidst this heavyhearted world, there are fleeting moments of joy: *'It's not always bad. There are moments of happiness and you learn to treasure these more'* (14-year-old).

Dreams therefore provide a sanctuary from the reality of war; they heal the ongoing trauma of the everyday and they shape an understanding of the present through their wishful desires for tomorrow. The imagination itself becomes a way to navigate within the perilous space. The war child has rarely owned an innocence to be lost or reclaimed. There is no yearning for the 'golden age' because the past is as painful and difficult as the present. Instead the aspiration is for change:

*For me, peace is security, confidence, the absence of fighting in the community; in the town. It means there are no guerrillas, army, paramilitaries, thieves or rapists. For me peace is a healthy life, normal and with no guns. I don't think I will ever see peace and if we don't have peace, it will just get worse.*

(10-year-old female).

The war child embodies a resilience through which they crave a peace within the here and now:

*The past was no happier than the present and I expect the future to be the same. I can only change my future if I change my present. We are on one long journey of misery if we focus on what has already happened and what might happen. Instead we need to concentrate on what is happening. We need to make the now better. And the only way to do that is by making peace.*

(17-year-old male).

The war child displays an inherent optimism, that is far from utopian: *'We want change and we think change will come, one day. But not if we give up. We must keep smiling'* (16-year-old female). For Boym (2001: xiv), this constitutes a 'sideways' nostalgia, in which the present takes precedence over the past. Boym describes a 'reflective nostalgia' which 'thrives in longing', but dwells on the ambivalences and contradictions of this longing, as opposed to 'restorative nostalgia', which 'attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home' (*ibid*, xviii). For the war child, the *now* becomes a potential transition between the status quo of what has always been, and the change of what might be. It presents a transformative opportunity.

The war child is therefore a young person in search of a present and it can be a dangerous mission. One boy recounts the story of his friend, murdered for choosing his studies over joining an armed group. Within the self-narrative of the child soldier, being able to live in the present therefore becomes the priority:

*They found him in the river.  
Killed just days before his graduation.  
All he wanted was to study.  
He was searching for a better life.  
His murder was a message for every boy and girl, for all of us.  
Our only future is the present.*

(18-year-old male).

*Warhood* also detaches the child from the wider world in which their ability to decide and choose for themselves is damaged. It perpetuates an anticipation that they will be caught up in the violence and as a member of an armed group, in particular:

*I remember when death entered my home, without permission and without even bothering to knock at the door. But it didn't upset me. It was silent. It was expected. And I knew it was the beginning. War was now part of me. They could take me or I could go so I went. I don't think I knew then why. But I do know now. It was actually the first time I felt in control.*  
(19-year-old female).

Violence therefore becomes a tragic inevitability, and recruitment into an armed group an imminent prospect. Enlisting becomes a solution to counter the war child's self-doubt and uncertainty, incorporating a sense of agency through which it is hoped the situation they are faced with will be resolved. This decision to enlist is constructed gradually, and as a direct response to the child's warhood and their perceptions of helplessness. It constitutes a 'cumulative epiphany', which 'signifies emotions or reactions to experiences over time' (Denzin,2001:34-38) and is a prelude to self-empowerment, if also to war. It is an attempted transformation to restore stability, security, and of course, peace, which is also perhaps an oxymoron, as usually all it brings is more violence and conflict:

*By going with them, we think it's the answer to everything. I remember walking off into the mountains. I felt scared, but I also felt that I didn't have to worry anymore. We see the armed group as being able to give us what nobody else has. Not just food, but also family and even purpose. At that particular moment, we don't realise we are stepping into more war.*  
(21-year-old male).

### **Spring's hope**

[insert Figure 2: The Tree of Love in Spring]

*I joined the FARC in 2005 at the age of 12 and at the age of 12 I knew exactly what I was doing. It was a choice that made me happy and my life began again*  
(20-year-old male).

If winter is the prelude to self-empowerment, then spring is the precise moment of emancipation and depicts the instant the war child becomes the child soldier. Spring

symbolises a new beginning through which fundamental change is anticipated. In Spring, the tree breathes once more. The Tree of Love is in bud and the bleakness of winter gives way to the rosiness of tomorrow. The outlook has become buoyant and expectant.

It may appear contradictory to some readers that the moment of enlistment represents a positive or optimistic development, but this must be viewed from the perspective of the child soldier. For many, it is the first real decision of their lives. On the margins of Colombia and within its 'spaces of death' (Taussig, 1984), decisions about job, career and education are scarce and the privilege of opportunity is sparse. In contrast to conscription, which represents painful coercion and even abduction, enlisting is bound up with hopeful notions of change, success and purpose.

There is of course no set or uniform experience behind a child's decision to join an armed group, but the particular difficulty is how to recognise the extent to which a child becomes a broker in their own destiny. From this perspective, 'children should be recognised as agents that have power to take decisions that affect their lives' (Martuscelli and Duarte Villa 2018: 391). For some, the decision to enlist is less cumulative and more immediate in that it is related to a specific moment in time.

*I grew up in a village where war was my every day. Bullets. Bombs. Death. In my village, they recruited children as if it were normal. It was the only opportunity for work. Nobody thought it was bad. So, I knew one day I would have to join too, even I didn't really want to.*

*Every day I had to pass the commander's house to go to school. When I passed, I always got compliments and whistles that bothered me. For me, it was annoying because he was an older man, and he could be my dad. That's why I didn't like him.*

*One day he threw a party. Everybody was there. He took me aside and told me I was beautiful. He asked if I wanted to be his girlfriend. I said "no". I had a boyfriend from another village. We met at school. Every afternoon, we used to meet at the Tree of Love. One day he came all scared and told me that he had been threatened, and they told him that he had to leave me alone, and that if he continued with me, they were going to kill him and chop him into a thousand pieces. This is what they do. The commander told me it would not just be my boyfriend but also my family.*

*I didn't give in to his persistence. I decided to join them out of fear of something happening to my family. I was scared of the commander, but I wasn't scared of joining. I pretended to like him so he would leave my boyfriend and family alone. I actually felt relief. I knew I would join one day and when I did, I felt I could start again, and I knew I was keeping the people I loved safe. I was actually strangely happy. It was my decision.*

(19-year-old female).

Texts such as the one above become what Berents (2020:2) calls 'counter narratives', in that they challenge the dominant framing of children as passive victims. For Kate Lee-Koo (2018:62), children have:

'the experience, skill, strength, cunning, political consciousness, capacity for judgement and the ability to act, all of which... qualify as a form of agency and all of which have the capacity to shape a child's immediate environment.'

In the text above, a resistance against the advances of the armed group dissolves in order to protect family and loved ones. Although the landscape of the inevitability of recruitment is never far from sight, there is a definitive moment in which a choice is made and in which recruitment becomes enlistment. The author emphasises how she did not give in or concede. She stresses how this was her own decision. Importantly she tells the reader how she 'joined' the armed group, rather than being 'recruited' by it.

This decision to enlist embodies a form of survival agency, which is also present in other stories. The child soldier often has no food on the table at home and has frequently been abandoned by their parents either through neglect, through death or through capture by the authorities. The family situation may also be one of abuse. The child perceives enlistment as the only way out. Survival becomes dependent on going to war:

*I wanted to eat. I remember always being so hungry and I knew the guerrillas could give me food so of course I joined them (16-year-old male).*

*When you have a dad that beats your mum and beats you, then war seems easier somehow. I just wish I could have taken my mum with me (14-year-old male).*

In contrast, the story presented below illustrates what Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) have labelled the 'slipperiness' of violence. In a country that has historically experienced protracted conflict and which continues to struggle to establish a sustainable peace, boundaries between forms or types of violence have disintegrated. Political violence becomes 'privatised' or internalised and becomes 'the context in which the reproduction of all other forms of violence occurs' (Sánchez G. 2001: 25). Although the decision to enlist in the story presented below is clearly defined by a particular moment in time, it is set against a backdrop of 'liking' guns and violence. The privatisation of violence is perhaps therefore

subconscious, resting dormant, patiently waiting to be awoken by some form of emotional trigger:

*I had always liked guns. I remember how the guerrillas would let me play with their weapons. It seemed fun because most of the time I was really bored. I did not realise at the time that this was dangerous. I never wanted to use a gun for real. Then, one day in the mountains, bodies of people appeared. People from my community. The mums and dads of my friends. Killed by the paramilitaries. From that moment I got so sad to see the dead, who had been dismembered. That's when I decided to participate with the guerrilla to defend my family because this armed group was not so bad to the indigenous people. I wanted to help my friends fight back and I wanted to make sure the same thing didn't happen again. I felt something I could not control. Sadness. Anger. I just knew I had to do something. Looking back, I suppose that's when I found my purpose. I had been a kid who liked guns. Now I was a kid who wanted to kill to defend his friends. It was a new life. I might have even been happy. (14-year-old male).*

The text above perhaps displays more determination in its display of agency than the first in this section. It depicts an emotionally driven moment in which the child appears to lose control. A massacre within his community becomes a trigger for him to seek revenge, disguised above as 'protection'. There is also a hint that this might not have been a rational decision, even if the choice became a 'purpose' and seemed to be a happy one.

Importantly, the seeking of revenge through enlistment provides a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. It epitomises an emotional agency, which underpins the decision to enlist and which is directly linked to the author's desire to protect and avenge his community, rather than perpetrate violence for an ideological cause. It is an assertion of self amid the chaos of conflict and insecurity. In these vignettes (above), the war child experiences a 'major epiphany', which 'touches every fabric of a person's life' (Denzin, 2001: 34-38). Fuelled either by a very human desire to survive or by an equally human experience of intense emotion, this 'major epiphany' provokes a decision intended to instigate change.

### **Summer's soldiering**

[insert Figure 3: The Tree of Love in Summer]

*In the mountains that we see,  
There are piles of dead, buried among us:  
Guerrillas, soldiers and women, who tried to escape.*

(14-year-old female).

Come Summer, the Tree of Love is in full bloom. The full-bodied pink of its flowers contrasts against the deep green of the mountains. Its plentiful branches reach down, offering a protective arm for those, who seek it. Summer brings freedom for the child soldier as he or she begins a search for self-acceptance and inevitably conceives of the 'piles of dead' that lay in their wake:

*I was happy with my decision to join. And once I got there, I enjoyed being part of something. I was constantly told what we were doing was making the country a better place, but you have this feeling that never goes away. A feeling that actually we are causing harm and pain. It's a feeling you learn to live with. (16-year-old female).*

Experiences of child soldiering are as diverse as the reasons driving the initial decision to join, but child soldiers become surrogates of a conflict to which they ultimately do not belong.

Life inside the ranks provides many challenges for a child. They are made responsible for their own belongings: they must carry their tents and rucksacks on long and arduous journeys, they must wash their own uniforms. They learn how to use and care for their weapons, assuming regular guard and combat duties. They cook food for the entire regiment and dig cesspits in the camps. Some harvest coca leaves and work in cocaine laboratories, others are trained as radio operators. The child must contribute from day one, never being granted dispensation for being smaller and weaker than the rest, yet despite this hardship, soldiering somehow offers everything a childhood has not or could not provide. From hot meals to love and friendship. Child soldiers become the wards of a rebellion:

*For the first time ever, I felt part of something. I had people that cared about me more than my family ever did. I had a purpose. (17-year-old male).*

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that many child soldiers appear happier inside the ranks than in their previous lives, despite how difficult it may become for them. This makes it easy to 'ignore' the surrounding difficulties and atrocities of war:



*Being part of something and being loved conceals the bad that we did. Plus, the classes we did everyday taught us how to think. How to oppose the state and its capitalism. I think I only realised the bad once I was away from it. Inside, it's bad and you don't realise. Outside, it's bad and you do realise. Well, to be honest, you always realise. I just ignored it. (17-year-old male).*

Even those that were forced to join demonstrate a resilience, perhaps shaped and supported by the adversity of their *warhood* experiences:

*You learn to live with it. There is a strict routine, which helps. And friends. In fact, it becomes easy to forget that this was never a choice (19-year-old male).*

*It's something I got used to and even came to enjoy. I felt I belonged. You even get used to the danger. They teach you this is a war to make things better and you believe that. You have to believe that or you wouldn't survive (17-year-old male).*

Anagnorisis defines a startling discovery, which marks the transition from ignorance to knowledge. For the child soldier, this 'problematic moment' or 'minor epiphany' (Denzin, 2001) comprises a realisation that life at war is more challenging than first expected or conceived. This growing awareness creates a mission to justify and to self-assure through a process of self-acceptance, even if it perhaps involves a certain level of self-denial. Full acknowledgement of the realities of war and the decision to enlist embeds the hope for change, success and purpose, which it once represented, within a context of violence, death and suffering. It nullifies the self-empowerment and escape that enlistment first provided and engenders a realisation that perhaps very little has changed:

*It was worse than I expected. I wasn't expecting to fire my weapon at people. I began to question what I was doing, but I knew there was nothing I could do about it. So, you live with it. I told myself if I don't fire my weapon, I will probably be hit by a soldier firing theirs (19-year-old male).*

*I had to accept this was the choice I made and so you begin to convince yourself it was the right thing. I didn't want to accept what I was doing was wrong. And in some ways that is easy because they are constantly reminding us about how the struggle is for the poor and for the people (16-year-old female).*

It is important to note that gendered experiences of conflict are clearly evident in the autobiographical vignettes, despite claims by the child soldiers that boys and girls were treated equally. As ideology was used to justify conflict and violence, this is perhaps another example of how doctrines can be transmitted from war commanders and subconsciously accepted by child soldiers without challenge. Male child soldiers write frequently about guns and violence:

*What I got to like was the food, also the clothes, also the training that they gave us on how to shoot a gun and escaping clashes. Many bullets had been fired in the fields, there were puddles of mud, some heavy mesh and also a resistance that they should form against the other side. They also taught us to shoot and take aim at a target, to shoot where we wanted, and that was the big toy that they would give me. From that moment, weapons and bullets, I would always like. The first time I fired a gun, I was a little scared. The backblast knocked me down and the other guerrillas made fun of me because I was too small. (14-year-old male)*

Texts like this illustrate a false innocence, projected as part of the author's self-acceptance. The fact that guns and rifles become fun-like is to conceal their destructive powers. Child soldiers seem to make great efforts to overlook and evade their actual participation in war, even if the consequences of violence are in plain sight:

*Of course, I fired my weapon and of course I saw dead bodies. But I never really knew how that related to me. I was never at the front of battle, the young fighters were always kept at the back. Perhaps that's why war for me was never more than a game. Until now. It is only looking back that I see what it really was. In the moment, it's impossible to understand, I think. If I could speak to that me, I would warn myself. I would try to open my eyes and get myself to admit what was happening. But even then, I am not sure what I could have done. It would have been impossible to escape. (15-year-old female).*

Here the dialogic nature of autobiography, highlighted by Douglas (2010) begins to emerge. Sometimes the horrors of war only really transpire once the individual has been removed from the dangerous space of conflict. However, this is not a dialogue between the self of the knowing adult and the naïve child. This young author is just 15 years old. Instead it becomes

a dialogue between the soldier and the ex-soldier. Importantly, this is not a closed or conclusive conversation. It is an open and dynamic dialogue, a contentious and incomplete text in which the author's thought process and reflections are laid bare.

The female texts contained narratives of harassment and assault:

*If the commander meets the girl he wants, he tells her to be with him, and like that the other girls can have boyfriends inside, but the commander warns them that they cannot have children because it is a struggle, not a nursery.*

*Some get pregnant and hide it, so they won't notice.*

*But after six or seven months, they are forced to abort. Women don't want to, so the commander ties them-up and forces them to take a pill.*

*And if it doesn't work, they give them a drink, which makes the baby move a lot.*

*This stings, and the baby comes out dead.*

*Usually, when they catch women who run away to give birth, they enter the War Council, where each member votes for the punishment.*

*Most of the time, they choose execution by firing squad.*

*Other times, they make them do the most difficult work, like carrying things from one place to another, doing more guard duty and digging the cesspits for everyone.*

*There are women who cannot handle it and because of the memories of their abortions, they escape.*

*But since there are groups everywhere, they can find them easily (18-year-old female).*

Within this so-called era of post-conflict, the autobiography takes on external or social meaning, separate but conjoined to that of the individual. Child soldier stories therefore become testimonies through which justice can be pursued, providing evidence to formulate accusations of war crimes. The child soldier becomes a witness of history to establish "truth" and counter narratives of denial from those under investigation and on trial<sup>2</sup>.

Chouliaraki (2009) makes an important distinction between eye-witnessing and bearing witness in her research. Allan (2013:104), who applies this distinction to the practice of journalism, defines this as a 'duality of reporting', through which a reporter 'records reality (as eyewitness)' and also 'evaluates reality (or bears witness)'. The child soldier writing their autobiography offers a similar dual narrative in which they first explain and later question or assess their involvement and participation in war. Their texts assume goals of both justification and justice, where the former involves the personal process of exploring their role and the latter invites a public or social reflection on their experiences. Through seeking

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<sup>2</sup> Forced abortion within the ranks of the FARC has become a topic of investigation for Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), created as part of the 2016 peace accords.

to understand and make meaning of their own lives, the young authors embark upon a social evaluation of history. For the child soldier, if the early days of war constitute a 'game' and substitute family life, then it is only as time progresses that the reality of violence and their participation in it can be truly assessed, as their awareness grows.

### **Autumn's reflection**

[insert Figure 4: The Tree of Love in Autumn]

*Once-upon-a-time Mother Earth was full of beautiful trees and flowers. But then war came.*  
(11-year-old male).

Autumn brings a time for change. The leaves lose their green and the flowers fall. The Tree of Love is shedding its pink to expose its branches once more. For the child soldier, now outside the rank and file of the armed group, autumn provides a haven to reflect, even if its walls are weak and easily breached. The child soldier has become a child survivor, yet they continue to live in dangerous and risky spaces. Their journey into war may have ended, but the social, political and economic structures, which contextualised their voyage remain rigidly intact. The child survivor's future becomes dependent on evaluating and understanding their past, while still firmly anchored in the present of *warhood*:

*We are told we should do our best for a better future. But what about now? I want a better life today not tomorrow.*  
*And what does better mean? Well, I think all it can mean is peace.*  
*I want a peaceful life. I know war is in my past.*  
(15-year-old male).

*I am young so I never really think that I have a past. But now I'm a civilian again, I can look back at what happened and who I was and try and learn from it. The only way to be a better person is to learn from the mistakes and experiences of the past. And that's my goal.* (19-year-old female).

The cycle of seasons is now complete, but it is not broken. The child survivor is back to where they started and just as in winter must once again endure *warhood*, in which the danger of rearming and recommencing his or her cycle of violence is not just real, but also entirely possible. The threat or possibility of returning to a life of violence is ever-present:

*I mean my life now is no different to what it was before I joined the guerrilla. Nothing has changed so what is to stop me from going back?*  
(15-year-old male).

*Some people treat us like the enemy. It is hard to make friends. I miss the friends I had as part of the guerrillas.* (17-year-old female)

The stigmatisation and discrimination of former child combatants underpin the risk of re-recruitment in Cauca, amidst a backdrop of sustained criminal violence in which armed rivals compete for control of the illicit economies left behind by a now demobilised FARC insurgency. In their rush for control, the armed groups need to increase their numbers and they prey on the communities of Jambaló once more. Across Colombia, since the peace accords were signed in 2016, the recruitment of children and young people into crime and conflict has increased each year, according to the United Nations.

The young authors' narratives in this article therefore constitute a 'reflection in action' (Schon, 1995). The moment of writing attempts to restore the categories of before, now and next in attempts to decipher their experiences through hindsight. For Lambeck and Antze (1996), the act of recall requires a gaze far into memory, but for these young authors it is rather a gaze deep into themselves. The objective is to create healing and the prevention of re-recruitment through establishing meaning with a focus on the prospect for post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996). This concept is founded on the idea that there can be positive effects of traumatic experiences, including terror attacks and military combat (Park and Helgeson, 2006), that can support the process of building resilience. This approach offers a more nuanced approach than an approach solely focused on the negative effects of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), whilst acknowledging that post-traumatic growth (PTG) is less likely in a person who is already resilient. Whilst the child soldiers of Cauca manifest some characteristics of resilience, they are arguably still forming as personalities as they are young people, so there is potential for post-traumatic growth.

The child survivor texts of autumn assume an advocacy role:

*After that part of my life, I now find myself here with my friend,*

*reflecting on the events of our lives and sharing those stories at the tree of love. I just want to move forward, have a profession or also what other children want, but sometimes the government doesn't care about us. I wish they supported us by sending us teachers, who understand the situation we are living so that they encourage us and do not demotivate us. Because of being indigenous, we do not have as many opportunities, because we do not have money. I also wish that through these narratives, children or adults from different places will understand what we live through, and that they won't judge us, and that with this story, those who make war will listen to us (17-year-old female).*

This text constitutes an appeal for help through a call to action and becomes a 'regenerative force' (Douglas 2010), appealing directly and simultaneously to those in power, as well as to the reader and to those who 'make war'. In this sense, the act of listening becomes just as important as 'the act of telling' (Douglas 2010), involving the community directly in the child survivor's quest to understand. For Felman and Laub (1992:57), 'this listener of trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening he comes to partially experience trauma in himself.'

For the reader, autobiography provides 'indispensable eyewitness accounts of large-scale and everyday violence' and offers 'an antidote to universalising narratives about evil, suffering and history' (Gilmore 1994: 367). For the young author, autobiography presents an opportunity for catharsis, which is shaped by the generation of resistance:

*I know what happened to me was wrong. I know that it was my choice, but I don't know if I am responsible. I do not want to make excuses. I am just trying to understand. I think if I can do that, I will be stronger and I will be able to tell them no when they try and take me again (15-year-old male).*

The act of reflection encourages a 're-lived epiphany', where meaning is attained through hindsight and 'the reliving of the experience' (Denzin, 2001):

*Who would say that the alphabet would have helped me get off my chest all the thoughts that I felt I would never forget?  
That with words, I would undo them. (14-year-old male).*

## **Conclusions**

An interesting similarity between many of these autobiographical vignettes is their 'representativeness' (Douglas, 2010), where the war child is able to speak beyond the self.

The war child author describes the feelings of others as if their own and relays the opinions and emotions of others through the use of the first-person plural. This 'we' provides the author, who does not wish to be seen as extraordinary or heroic, with a sense of protection and confidence, but it also conveys that their experiences should not be taken in the singular. Their 'we' emblematises the anguish and torment of an entire community, if not a whole generation.

The cycle that is represented by the seasons, with each 'season of self' characterised by a different type of epiphany (Denzin, 2001), indicates that, like the changes in the tree, no stage of the **self-story** will last for long, so a bad experience will not last forever and after autumn they can start the cycle over again without being recruited. However, some want to go back to the armed group (see the vignettes of autumn) because they are wistful or nostalgic for the relative security of life as a soldier. The challenge is to build resistance to re-recruitment so that these youngsters are able to combat the temptation within spaces that remain dangerous and are able to invest fully in their fragile hopes and dreams. Projects like the Tree of Love can foster post-traumatic growth, enabling the former child soldiers not just to 'bounce back' but to bounce back to a better place. In a socio-political context where the cyclical character of violence is relatively unchanged, this sense of agency has to come from within. The autobiographical mosaic that emerges from these 'seasons of self' offers hope for finding a route out of the cycle of violence through the construction of both resilience and resistance, where the former is defined as an emotional capacity to recover and overcome, and the latter as an ability or strategy to refuse the risk and danger of taking up arms. Then the journey from war child to child soldier to child survivor can become complete.

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